ON05966

ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

RESPONSE
to the
CONSULTATION PAPER
on the
INTEGRATION
of
EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS

June, 1992

ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

The ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION represents over 90 public boards of education from all regions of the province, serving over 1,700,000 students and adult learners. OPSBA speaks for public education in Ontario and represents the interest of the public school trustees to the government, the public and the media.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This submission was prepared by the OPSBA Curriculum Committee:

	Board	Region
Donna Cansfield, Chair	Etobicoke	Central West
Allan Jones, Vice-Chair	Nipigon-Red Rock	Northern
Barbara Bellmore	Essex	Western
Glenn Blanchard	Lanark	Eastern
Evan Bogart	Hastings	Eastern
Marg Bullock	Halton	Central West
Liz Fulford	Lincoln	Southern
Marjorie Loughrey	Ottawa	Central East
Alex Macrae	Wellington	Southern
John Scott	Perth	Western
Pat Toffolo	Cochrane-Iroquois Falls	Northern

Staff Resource:
Marie Pierce, Director of Northern Affairs and Curriculum

Introduction

The Ontario Public School Boards' Association, representing 93 public school boards throughout the province, is pleased to provide comments on the consultation document on the integration of exceptional students.

Although it is the stated intent of the government that "the integration of the exceptional pupil into local community classrooms" will commence by September 1993, a number of issues must be addressed before any policy decisions are made on the full implementation of the "integration option" by school boards:

- There must be a clarification of terms and a building of consensus on these terms;
- Assessment and placement issues must be examined;
- Conditions necessary for success of the integration option, including financial and human resources, must be put in place.

The ideal goal is that of maximum possible integration. However, schools will encounter obstacles of a more practical nature in attempting to place exceptional students in the most enabling environment. The choice of a particular model of instruction is dependent on factors such as teacher preparation and attitudes, peer and parental attitude, not to mention the cost of changing the existing structures (be they physical, curricular or attitudinal) to accommodate the implementation of the ideal.

Not only are there definitional ambiguities and a variety of programs from which to choose; other intervening factors cannot be ignored. A sampling of other issues that must be taken into account when making integration decisions include: school board size and geographical location; the safety of other pupils; the availability of local expertise and support services; physical accessibility of the school; and cost.

Identification and Placement

Definitional concerns are at the heart of the integration issue for implicit in the definition of integration are assessment, placement and program decisions. Before the integration option is required by all school boards, agreed-upon definitions must

be developed. There must be a clear understanding of what is meant by integration and how it is to be implemented.

Theoretically, school boards face the task of providing the 'ideal' for every exceptional child. Therefore the school must assess and place each child, then choose from a spectrum of options the best method of delivering instruction to that child. Providing appropriate educational programs for learners in the most enabling and supportive environment should be the underlying objective of the identification, placement and review (IPRC) process.

Identifying and placing children remains a complicated issue with no hard and fast rules. One of the difficulties is that the terms used to describe exceptional students are often vague and have changed dramatically over the past two decades. While there is general agreement about vision or hearing impairment (although even here there is some debate), there is little agreement about what is meant by such terms as "learning disability" or "behaviour problem".

The current terminology used to designate exceptional pupils needs to be clarified. OPSBA is disappointed that the consultation document did not address definitional concerns.

The need to undertake a review and clarification of terms is highlighted in the current government initiative to remove the "hard to serve" designation from the *Education Act*.

Hard to Serve Designation

The "hard to serve" designation was placed in the *Education Act* for those rare situations where a school board could not provide a program to meet the educational needs of the individual child. In such cases, the province assumes the total cost of the placement [Section 34(17)].

Designating a pupil as "hard to serve" requires a more complicated process than that required for the identification, placement and review (IPRC) of other exceptional pupils. OPSBA supports amendments to the *Education Act* which provide for the rationalization of this process so that "hard to serve" pupils are governed by the same provisions that apply to other exceptional pupils. The current IPRC process has worked very well in the identification of students with special needs and the development of programs which meet these needs.

The designation of a pupil as "hard to serve" has been rarely utilized by school boards. This is due, in part, to the responsiveness of boards to the provision and development of programs to meet the needs of all exceptional pupils. It is also due, in part, to the lack of clarification of terms used to define special education pupils.

OPSBA cannot support the removal of those sections of the *Education Act* which deal with designating pupils as "hard to serve" without assurances that adequate provincial resources will be provided for the development of programs to meet the educational needs of these students. If these needs cannot be met by the local board or purchased from another board, then the province must provide for placement outside the province or adequate funding for school boards to develop the appropriate programs.

OPSBA supports the development of these programs in Ontario. However, this cannot be done without adequate resources. Removal of the "hard to serve" designation cannot be treated in isolation from the whole question of the adequacy of funding for special education students. The current level of provincial funding for special education programs is already inadequate to meet needs.

Based on these specific concerns over the "hard to serve" designation and more general concerns over the identification process in general, OPSBA recommends

[1] That the government undertake a review and clarification of the terminology used to designate special education pupils.

Range of Placements

OPSBA believes that there must be flexibility in program options ranging from partial integration to full integration. One model of integration will not serve the best interests of exceptional students. School boards should be encouraged to provide a range of placements within their fiscal and human resource capabilities.

A purchase of service option should continue to be available for school boards.

Identification and Placement Decisions

When undertaking the identification and placement process, not only must definitions be clarified, decisions must be made with regard to who is to make the decision for integration. What are the relative roles of the student, the parent and the school

board in making this decision? What criteria are to be established to assist in making this decision? What, if any, arbitration process needs to be established in the case of conflict with regard to the decision to integrate or not integrate?

There are no easy answers to these questions. Indeed, there are probably different answers depending on individual and local circumstances. However, when attempting to answer these questions in the development of a process for achieving the implementation of the integration option in every school board jurisdiction in this province, care must be taken to achieve a balance - a balance between the needs of the child, the parent and the school. Where required, there must be an arbitration process to ensure that this balance is met.

OPSBA recognizes that parental and school board responsibilities are equally important parts of the identification, placement and review process (IPRC). OPSBA supports the development of appropriate procedures and mechanisms to make parents and pupils an integral part of the decision-making process and to promote communication with them about all aspects of education including provisions for exceptional pupils.

Any identification and placement process that is developed should contain the following features:

- full disclosure and sharing of information by parents and school personnel.

- an understanding and knowledge of exceptionalities as well as the IPRC process are important for educators and parents

- parents must be aware of the processes for ongoing communication with staff related to the appropriateness of the program, the review schedules and the appeal procedures

- parents and the learner should have the opportunity to visit various proposed programs and to consider all the appropriate alternatives which focus on the benefits for the learner's academic and social development

- An understanding of what the partnership between parents and educators means in terms of pertinent information, availability of resources and expectations for programming and placement;

- informed consent must include an understanding of evaluation practices, ensuing reports and possible implications for any recommendations that are made

Parents should have the right to

- request an IPRC hearing for their child

- have access to information, reports and the opportunity to have support personnel accompany them to an IPRC

- know what resources/programs are available

- to have visitation opportunities prior to a placement

- to be aware of the implications of each available option related to refusal/acceptance

- to know that a parent's right to choose placement should be equally considered in the decision-making process

Parents' responsibilities in the process include active participation in the education process; providing full disclosure and assisting with assessments; participation in the development of the short term and long term planning for the learner; and, a willingness to represent the interests of the learner throughout the IPRC process.

Within the IPRC process, the rights and responsibilities of the school board should include:

- the responsibility to provide a range of appropriate programs and placement opportunities that are within a board's fiscal capabilities and available resources

- the establishment of a special education identification, placement and review committee

- be active in pursuing with other government agencies, the allocation and coordination of available resources and programs for learners with special needs

- communication with parents in ways which maximize understanding and encourage participation.

Appeal Process

In any proposals for change to the current special education provisions in Ontario in which emphasis is to be placed on the integration option; a balance between the roles of the child, parent and education personnel in the assessment and placement process must be guaranteed.

It must be recognized, however, that disagreements between the parent and the school board with regard to both identification and placement will occur. As a result, an appeal and arbitration mechanism must be put in place to deal with cases of conflict with regard to the decision to integrate or not integrate.

The current provisions under the *Education Act* have worked effectively over the years and should be examined to determine whether they would accommodate the changes proposed by the government with regard to the integration option.

Every effort should be made to avoid the need for legal recourse on the part of parents.

Factors Affecting Placement

The ideal goal is that of maximum possible integration. However, schools will encounter obstacles of a more practical nature in attempting to place exceptional students in the most enabling environment. The choice of a particular model of instruction is dependent on factors such as teacher preparation and attitudes, peer and parental attitude, not to mention the cost of changing the existing structures (be they physical, curricular or attitudinal) to accommodate the implementation of the ideal.

OPSBA believes that placement decisions should be selective because not all exceptional students can or should be integrated. Decisions should be based on parents' wishes, needs of the student, regular class suitability, resource availability, and both teacher attitudes and competencies. Other factors for consideration include the student's social and academic abilities, age appropriate placement, and multi-aged classes.

Pupils are placed in an appropriate program after they have been carefully assessed. This assessment may consist of many components including: informal and formal testing; observation of the pupil at work and at play; conversations with the pupil's parents and teachers; discussions with the pupil and his or her peers; and, examination of past performance.

The placement decision must be based on the needs of the child and the resources available to fulfil those needs. It is recognized that under certain conditions the mainstream cannot accommodate a child's unique needs.

Models of Instruction

Assessment and placement are not the only issues; the appropriateness of the educational program and the quality of the social interaction must be given careful consideration. No one integration instructional model will be appropriate for all students. A variety of instructional models have, of necessity, been developed in response to the need for models which are appropriate to the given exceptionality of the child.

The consultation document is silent on the issue of types of programs to be provided once assessment and placement decisions have been made. The government must examine the nature of the programs to be provided and ensure that appropriate support, resource and curriculum documents are available to school boards.

Monitoring

Regardless of the model of instruction chosen, there must be careful monitoring of the implementation of integration and assessment of its outcomes.

When do we know that our efforts in special education have paid off? What indicators do we presently use to assess the outcomes of special education programming? What outcomes should we monitor?

Secondary School Issues

In examining various instructional models for integration, there is a noticeable lack of research and analysis on integration models for secondary school students. The emphasis in the research is on the elementary classroom situation. Before the integration option is made available in all school boards in Ontario, the implications of this option on placement and program decisions at the secondary level must be carefully examined. The implications of integration on the current Ministry initiative to de-stream grades nine and ten and the restructuring of education must be evaluated.

Credit Equivalency

With regard to the issue of some form of recognition and credit equivalency for pupils with developmental disabilities, OPSBA recognizes that accomplishments/gains are important for all learners.

Although there should be some form of recognition of achievement; OPSBA does not believe that credit equivalency is the answer. Some method of measurement of achievement and an accompanying transcript should be developed so that both the learner and future employers will need clear indication of the skills achieved.

Post-21 Issues

Currently, children with developmental disabilities have the right to attend school until age twenty-one.

OPSBA supports the proposed amendments to the *Education Act* which provide for students with developmental disabilities who have been designated by the principal to be secondary pupils to have the right to attend school for a total of seven years after completing elementary school.

These changes do not, however, address the needs of those students who require additional education and social skills training in order to successfully make the

transition to employment and/or independent community living. Additional, coordinated and comprehensive programs need to be developed to serve the needs of these students. These programs should not be the sole responsibility of the education system. OPSBA recommends

[2] That the government examine, through an inter-ministerial committee, the educational needs of "Post 21" students".

Factors Critical to Success

This section deals with the more salient issues school boards face in the implementation of integration which include: teacher education; parent and peer orientation; clarification of the role of schools in the provision of support services; financial and human resources.

Timelines

There must be sufficient time to prepare for change to ensure success. A program of integration requires a serious commitment of time and planned orientation activities from a school board. Once it has been decided that integration will be offered, the school principal, the regular classroom teachers, the exceptional student, the regular students and the parents of both groups of students will all need to be prepared.

Teacher Education

There must be adequate time and resources for teacher in-service. The success of any program will rest on the attitudes of school board personnel. Successful integration will only be achieved if there is a high degree of commitment and support.

There is a great need to offer pre-service and in-service to educators who will be responsible for teaching and administering integration programs.

Teachers (and administrators) must be able to take appropriate pre-service or in-service education courses. The lack of preparation by regular classroom teachers was a major concern of the school boards surveyed by the Canadian Education Association (1985). It was found that teachers do not feel adequately trained to handle the needs of exceptional pupils.

Pre-service

Pre-service training on exceptional children in the Faculties of Education is essential. Teacher training programs must become oriented towards a comprehensive approach for training teachers to work with children who have various academic, behavioral and physical handicapping conditions.

OPSBA recommends

[3] That special education training be a compulsory component of the pre-service education experience.

In addition to a specific course, this training should include mandatory pre-service experiences for teachers in training in a variety of specialized support/care settings.

Special and regular class teacher training programs at the university level must be carefully evaluated and brought in line with modern research and trends in the area of integration. Teacher training institutions should be in the forefront in educational research that deals with the most effective strategies of intervention and remediation so they relate to the education of children with learning and behavioral problems.

The Ministry has a responsibility to assist educators by mandating Faculties of Education to provide core course requirements in the area of special education as well as including periodic up-grading programs to all staff who will be providing programs for learning in integrated settings.

In-service

If the goal in special education is to fully integrate, mandatory pre-service training for the regular classroom teacher is crucial to achieving that goal.

Poor teacher training is often named as the number one negative aspect of integration. Courses are needed which provide more direct contact with exceptional children and help teachers work with a variety of disabilities and with the available educational resources. Very specific skills are required by teachers in integrated classrooms.

In-service programs are required which

- are ongoing in order for teachers to acquire knowledge about exceptionalities, be aware of effective teaching strategies and be cognizant of available resources and supports;

- involve teachers as partners in order to provide learners with special needs with the appropriate programs.

Other areas in which teachers need more preparation are counselling and working with parents, being aware of their own attitudes toward exceptional pupils, and helping children in integrated classrooms respect each other and work together.

Administrators

Some of the in-service areas of particular benefit to administrators include integration models, adapting and elaborating curriculum and instruction for special needs students, assessment and monitoring procedures, placement criteria and process, parent counselling, and learning about community support services and school building facilities for special needs children.

Administrators must become well-informed about legal requirements, so that the most effective programming can be planned for the special child in regular classroom settings.

Although most school boards provide some kind of preparation for staff members involved in integration, in many cases it is sporadic and informal. In-service training provides the best results when presented on an on-going basis for regular and special education teachers.

Getting regular classroom teachers to understand integration and to approach it positively is a concern of many boards. There is an urgent need for co-operative, constructive dialogue within a school about the needs and programs of exceptional students. No integration program will work without the involvement and commitment and training of regular classroom teachers and the full co-operation of principals, the school administration and the board.

The success of integration will depend on the attitude of regular class teachers towards integration and towards exceptional students.

There are other concerns school boards have about their staff. These concerns include equalizing the workload of the personnel, providing sufficient support for regular teachers, implementing individualized instruction with its resulting workload increase, scheduling classes and providing enough time and opportunities for teachers to consult with resource people and plan their programs.

Class Size

OPSBA supports continuation of the current Ministry of Education regulation concerning the size of self-contained classes for exceptional pupils. We do not, however, support a fixed ratio for integrated classroom settings. Class size should be based on the needs of all learners and will therefore vary. The needs of the learner are currently taken into account when boards decide on a class size.

The Ministry of Education must take into account the FTE realities and implications for funding of integrated classroom programs.

Parental and Peer Education

Increased awareness and understanding of parents can be achieved

- through regular opportunities to participate in information sessions and workshops regarding Ministry and Board initiatives, parents' roles and responsibilities in special programs settings and regular classroom settings.

- by information sharing to describe the range of options that are available and the advantages for the learner in each scenario

- by networking opportunities of families with learners with special needs in the system with those entering programs

- by encouraging parents' presence in the classroom to see and experience the program

- by continuing to develop a close working relationship and trust with the classroom teacher

- by helping parents understand and experience first-hand what resources and supports are available in the variety of placement settings.

- by encouraging school personnel and the public, in general, to become more aware of the needs of learners and to work in a cooperative manner toward further integration opportunities.

In addition, modification of the attitudes of the regular classroom students and their parents must be of paramount concern.

Support Services

The success of any integration of exceptional pupils into the regular classroom will rest, to a large extent, on the adequacy of the available support services. Regardless of the integration instruction model chosen, research has shown that there must be adequate support services and specialized personnel to assist the regular classroom teacher. In order for integration to work, a proper number of specialists and support services must be available to the teachers and students. These include speech and language therapists, nurses, hearing specialists, guidance counsellors, psychologists, health professionals and others.

The provision of these services is problematic for many school boards in which there is a shortage of both professional support personnel and financial resources. Innovative ways to meet these needs must be explored.

There is also the need to answer the more fundamental question as to whether it is the role of the school system to provide these services or whether the school system should utilize the services of other agencies. In the past, there has been the tendency for other agencies and Ministries to "dump" the provision of these services onto the school system. This cannot continue.

There is the need for a coordinated approach to the provision of children's services in order to avoid unnecessary duplication. There is the need for collaboration and cooperation between the various agencies which provide support for these children. A holistic framework of supports and services to ensure that the needs of all learners are met is not the sole responsibility of school boards. A coordination of efforts, resources and funding are needed to encourage and facilitate greater integration and ensure equitable and adequate supports.

The Role of the Community

The Special Education Advisory Committees (SEAC) play a valuable and needed role

in assisting school boards in developing appropriate programs for all learners. Nevertheless, all committees do not have representations from all exceptionalities nor do all exceptionalities have advocacy groups. In some communities it is difficult to find individuals interested in serving on the SEAC.

The current process could be improved by

- exploring ways to heighten the awareness and understanding by the public and educators regarding the role of SEAC;

- having agencies and local organizations act as resource personnel in establishing a network for teachers and parents; and,

- encouraging the participation of SEAC members in workshops and training sessions that are provided for teachers.

Financial and Human Resources

There must be a recognition, on the part of the government, that additional resources, both financial and personnel, must be provided before the integration option is available in every school board in Ontario. If the provincial government is to mandate the integration of exceptional students, then it has an obligation to provide appropriate financial resources to ensure its success.

The cost of having the integration option available in every school board depends very much on the model of integration that is adopted; the nature of the definitions being considered; and, decisions with regard to the relative roles of the education system and other agencies in the provision of support services.

Additional costs include the need for in-service and information programs both before and after implementation of integration, special equipment and materials, and additional support services for the regular classroom teacher and the students in an integrated program.

There must be local flexibility in the delivery methods and implementation timelines for new programs until the education finance reform process is completed.

Any action plan developed to provide for the implementation of the integration option must include a thorough analysis of the relative costs of providing these programs and the potential sources of funds for required services.

To examine the costs associated with integration, we need a clear description of the characteristics of the service delivery model. To date, little data is available which compares the costs of operating an inclusive school to the more traditional approaches of serving exceptional students. It is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with other Ministries, to undertake such an analysis.

Conclusions

Before the integration option is the norm in every school board in the province, a number of issues must be resolved and a number of conditions must be met.

- There must be flexibility in program options ranging from partial integration to full integration. One model of integration is insufficient and unworkable.

- There must be adequate time to prepare for change to ensure success.

- There must be adequate time and resources for teacher, supervisory officer, parent and student in-service and orientation programs.

- There must be recognition on the part of the government that additional resources, both financial and human, must be provided before any new programs are implemented.

- There must be an examination of the relative roles of the education system and other Ministries and service agencies in the provision and financing of specialized and support services for exceptional students.